

Canal's Practicability Doubted at one Time

Today we present the second of a series of articles by E. D. LeRoy, trustee of the Wayne County Historical Society. The series is appearing in the Monthly Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Department of Internal Affairs.

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(Second Article of Series)

In spite of the avidity with which the public had subscribed to the stock of the company, there were still many who doubted the practicability of building a canal over such mountainous country. The "Gazetteer," a New York City newspaper of the time, commented:

"A good deal has been said among some very enterprising and intelligent persons about a canal making an artificial navigation between the Hudson and Delaware Rivers to bring the coal of the Lackawaxen, a river of Pennsylvania, to the New York market.

"People, generally, doubt the practicability of the proposed route, from the vague ideas of the mountain character of the intermediate country."

Early in 1825 the accompanying estimate for the cost of operation, based upon figures supplied by Benjamin Wright, was published. The figures were somewhat low, probably because they were intended to paint a favorable picture of the prospects in view. They are of particular interest because they do show prevailing wages.

Also early in 1825—John B. Jervis who had gained a great deal of experience on the Erie Canal under Benjamin Wright, became the Chief Engineer of the Delaware & Hudson, and on July 13th, near the present town of Summitville, Sullivan County, New York, Philip Hone, President of the company and mayor of New York, turned the first shovelful of earth in the construction of the D. & H. Canal. Later the same month the first contract for construction of sixteen miles of canal known as the "Summit Level" were signed. Two other

contracts were let that year for construction between the Delaware and Hudson Rivers. Work continued throughout most of the winter and by early spring construction was moving rapidly.

Encouraged by the success of the Erie Canal, the manager had Engineer John B. Mills make a detailed survey up the Delaware Valley from the mouth of the Lackawaxen to Deposit with the express purpose of constructing a branch canal northward and then westward to the Susquehanna River and the southern counties of New York State. Benjamin Wright then Chief Engineer of the D. and H., was of the opinion that the Erie Canal would be inadequate to meet the needs of western towns and what was more he argued the D. and H. being further south would have a longer boating season.

Although advocating this branch canal to compete with the Erie, Wright argued against building the D. and H. with a greater prism than originally planned because "smaller boats were easier to handle and speedier."

The "Kingston Advocate" reported twenty-five hundred men and two hundred teams at work in the spring of 1826 and added that more were needed.

Work on the section between Port Jervis and Kingston continued through 1826 and into 1827, and on July 4, 1827, the following bit of news appeared in the Kingston "Plebian":—

"We last week, mis-stated the information of our informant on the subject of letting water into the canal. We should have said that it was expected that the water would be let into the canal, that day a week this present day. We do think that the occurrence of that event, on this or at all events some day near at hand, very probable, as we know of no obstacle to prevent or retard it."

Water was let into the canal during the first week of July, 1827, and appropriate celebrations were held at Bethany, Wayne County and elsewhere along the line of the canal. But it was soon found that the banks were too porous to hold a boating head of water; also several of the locks were imperfect so that it was not until September

that the first freight, a raft of pine lumber consigned to Theron Steel of Kingston, was shipped from Wawarsing, arriving at its destination on Monday, September 17th.

Because the company was unable to lay its hands on the necessary ready cash, the board of managers found it impossible to proceed with the construction of the canal west of Saw Mill Rift until March of 1827, when an additional eight hundred thousand dollars was obtained, over half of which was in the form of a loan from the State of New York. At that time contracts for the Delaware section and the Lackawaxen section as far as "The Narrows" were let, and work immediately begun. In April contracts for thirteen additional miles beyond the Narrows were signed, bringing the part contracted for to within seven miles of Kean's Pond, the planned terminus, but the report to the stockholders concerning the activities for 1827 explains: "It is determined, after much reflection and examination, to stop the canal at Dyberry Forks and from thence to construct a railroad to the coal mines, a distance of fifteen miles nearly."

This same report states that fifty acres of land (owned by Jason Torrey and William Schoonover) were given to the Delaware & Hudson Canal Company by these far-sighted land owners, who retained a like quantity for themselves, "in consideration of the benefits to accrue to the land which they retained." We can infer from this that the gift of land to the company to some extent influenced the choice of a terminus.

Work was plentiful throughout this section of the country at the time and there was some difficulty in obtaining labor, with the result that there was a temporary increase of about 20 per cent in wages over the daily rate of seventy-five cents, but with the importation of more "wild Irish" wages returned to normal.

With the coming of the canal now a certainty, a group of citizens from Wayne County gave serious consideration to the possibility of constructing a branch canal up the Dyberry to a junction with the Lackawanna River parallel to which, the confidently expected, an